HERITAGE REPORT

St James over Darwen: Witness and Storyteller

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings from a period of research into the history and heritage of East Darwen and St James over Darwen Church with reference to its social role and its connections to natural and other heritage that may be at risk of being lost.

Methodology

The research for this report has combined both existing historical sources and new investigation carried out during the project. Primary research has focused on archival material held at Lancashire Archives and within local collections, including vestry minutes, school and parish records, building papers, surveys and other documentary evidence relating to St James and the surrounding community. These sources have been analysed to identify patterns in the development of the church, its institutions and its role within the social life of East Darwen. This work has been supported by contextual research using published local histories, census data and documentary references to place the parish within the wider development of Darwen.

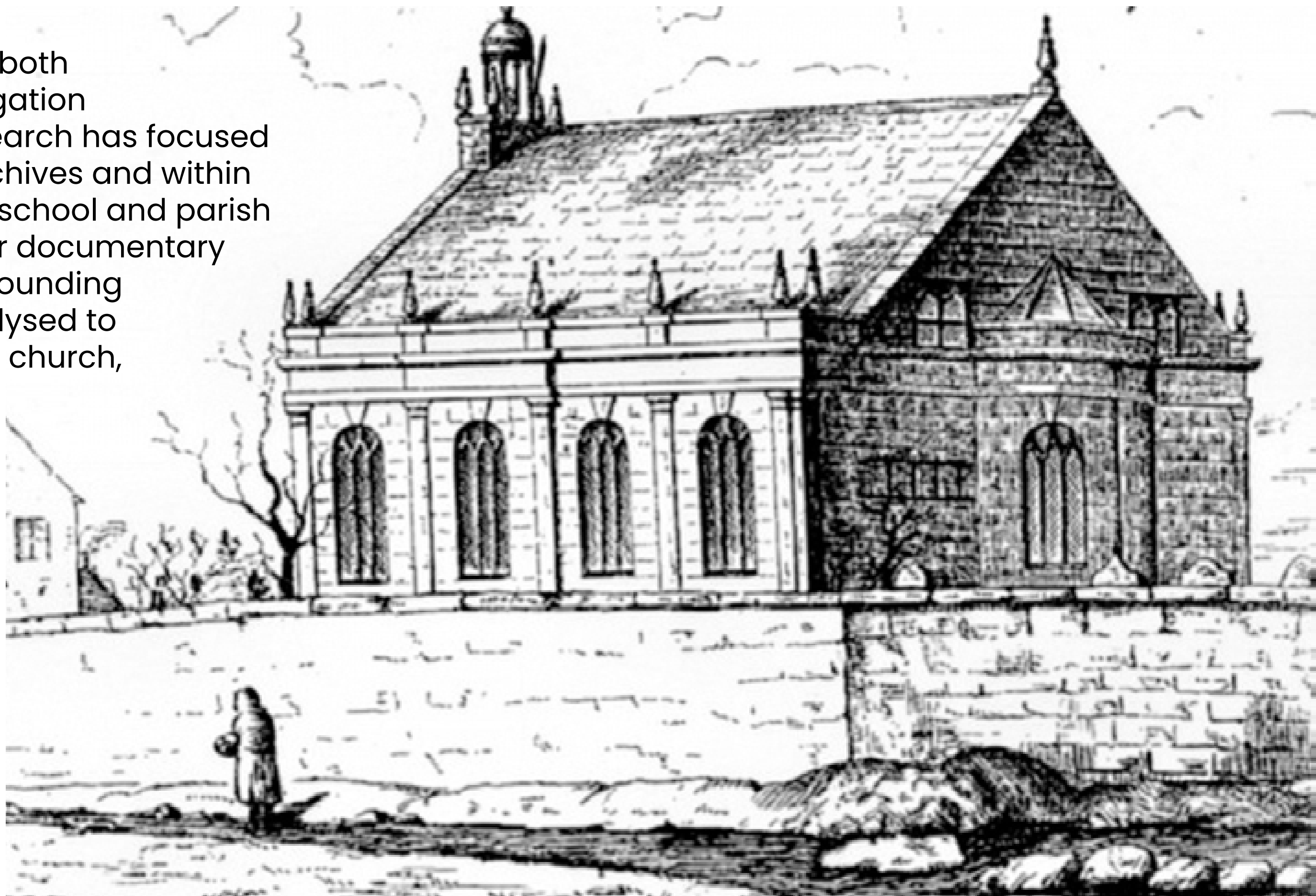


Image provided by Blackburn with Darwen Library & Information Service for the Cotton Town project (www.cottontown.org)

What is significant about the heritage of St James and East Darwen?

St James over Darwen holds a heritage spanning more than 500 years, serving as a point of reference within the wider social and economic changes in East Darwen. Its importance lies not simply in the longevity of the building, but in its role as a place that has helped people navigate change, maintain continuity, and sustain community across generations.

From its beginning as a modest chapel-of-ease in the 1500s through to later expansion and reconstruction, St James has continually adapted to the conditions around it. Periods of wear, rebuilding, and renewal reflect response rather than decline. At key moments, the church acted as a mediator between wider institutional systems and local realities, translating change into forms people could live with and sustaining stability during disruption.

This is evident in the development of education. In a working community with limited access to formal learning, St James became a provider of literacy, structure, and opportunity for young people. The growth of the Sunday School and the construction of a new school in the late nineteenth century show both ambition and tension, as national reforms were reconciled with local needs through negotiation and compromise.

The church's history is inseparable from the transformation of Darwen from a rural landscape into an industrial township shaped by population growth and migration. In this context, St James offered continuity and a framework through which residents could understand their place within a changing environment.

Beyond its institutional role, St James sustained social life through music, celebrations, and shared activities. These created opportunities for connection outside work, reinforcing relationships, identity, and belonging.

Taken together, the history of St James over Darwen is one of active engagement. Its significance lies in its ability to adapt, advocate, and connect, continuing to shape the lives of the community it serves.

THEME 1

Absorbing Change: a resilient and adaptable chapel

For more than 450 years, there has been a place of worship on this site. It has never stood still. The story of St James is not one long stretch of calm survival. It is a story of wear, worry, rebuilding and starting again.

Each time the building weakened, the community had to decide whether it was worth saving. Each time, they chose to renew it. It reflects a deeper function: the church as a place where disruption was absorbed and translated into continuity.

The first chapel, mid 1500s

The chapel was founded in the mid-1500s as a chapel-of-ease to Blackburn Parish Church, which at that time covered a vast geographical area. For families living and farming in scattered folds and farmsteads, the journey to Blackburn was long, difficult and often unrealistic, particularly in winter. The creation of a chapel-of-ease reduced the distance between institutional religion and daily life. In doing so, it represents the earliest example of St James acting as a mediator, taking a centralised system and adapting it to local need.

Left: 1786 - "The county Palatine of Lancaster" William Yates and Thomas Billinge,
Right: 1818 - "Map of the County Palatine of Lancaster from an actual survey made in the year 1818."C. Greenwood., Both courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, CC BY

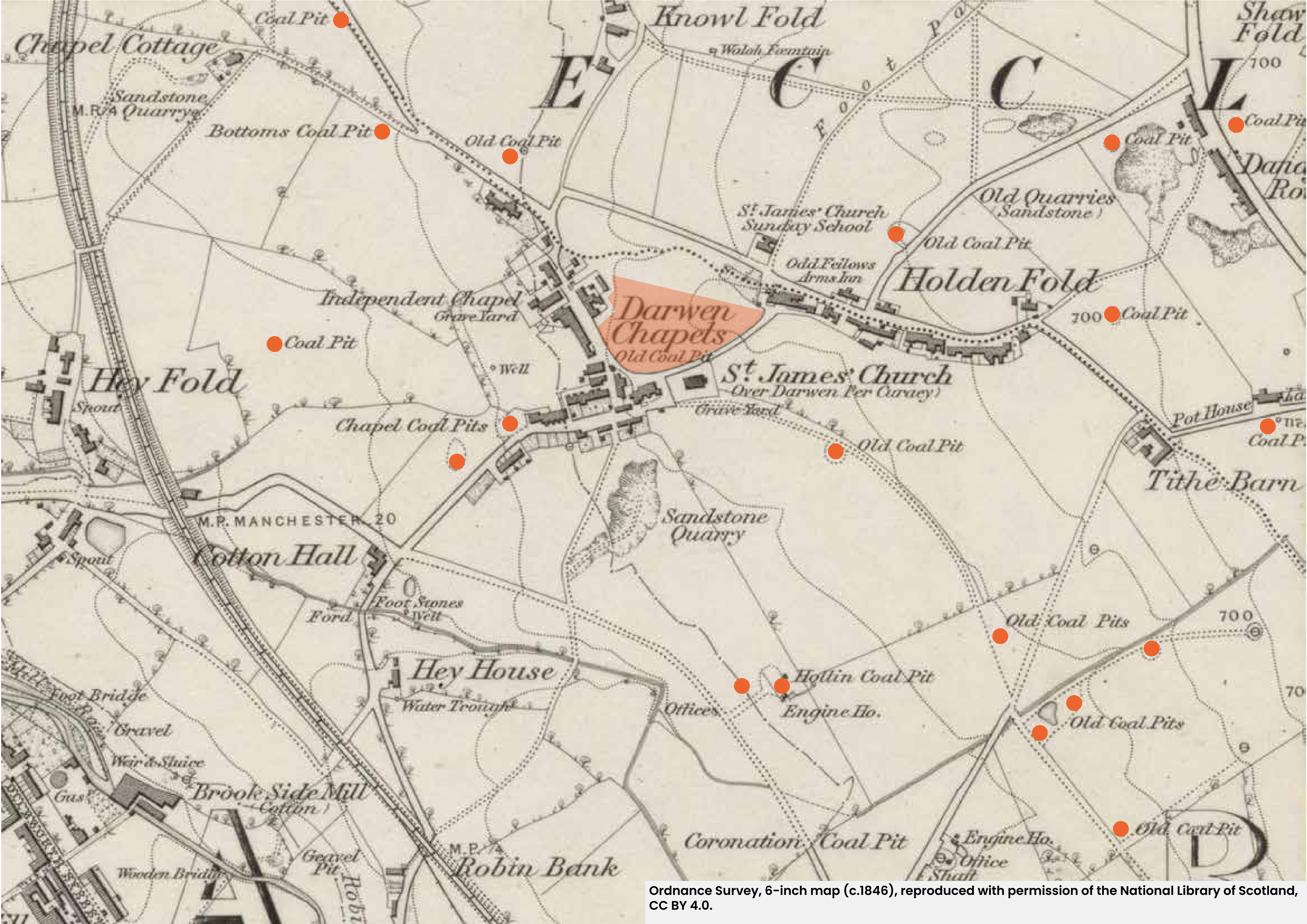
Funding and responsibility were local, but oversight remained with Blackburn. Clergy were appointed under its authority. St James therefore operated at the point where local experience met wider ecclesiastical structures, translating one into the terms of the other.

The early chapel would have been modest in scale, built of local stone, and surrounded by its burial ground. Burials were central to its function. For farming families, Closeness to burial was religious, social and emotional. It eased the strain at a time of loss and anchored families to this place.

Enforced Repair, 1692

By the later 1600s the chapel was described as dangerously decayed. Local promises of voluntary repair had not been enough to maintain the fabric of the building. In 1692 the Vicar of Blackburn formally required the inhabitants of Over Darwen to contribute towards necessary works.

This moment matters. It reveals that responsibility for the chapel was understood as collective, but that collective responsibility did not always operate smoothly. External



Ordnance Survey, 6-inch map (c.1846), reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland, CC BY 4.0.

authority had to intervene to compel local contribution.

The building was repaired because it was essential to the people. Without it, there was no local provision for worship or burial. The chapel's survival at this stage was not the product of wealth, but of necessity.

The Second Chapel, 1722-23

The repairs enforced in 1692 prolonged the life of the old chapel, but they did not solve the problems with the structure. By the early 1720s the building was again in serious decline and was ultimately judged beyond practical repair.

When the old chapel was taken down, the large amount of internal burial vaulting could be seen. For generations, interment had been permitted inside the building. Over time, this had undermined the structure. The foundations of the building were compromised by the burial vaults underneath. The chapel's primary function as a burial place had added to the buildings instability.

The decision was made to rebuild in 1722–23. The new chapel was constructed almost on the same site, but slightly offset to avoid disturbing the burial vaults. Its form remained simple. This was renewal without reinvention.

The rebuilding was funded through subscription. Around seventy-five individuals contributed nearly £94 18s towards the work, and collections were taken as far afield as Milnrow. The sums were modest. The effort was collective rather than elite-driven. This was not a project imposed from above, but one assembled from many small contributions.

In this process, the church again acted as a point of translation. The need for a stable building, the constraints of burial practice, and the limited resources of the community were brought together into a workable solution. The result was not ideal, but it was sufficient, and it allowed the continuation of shared life.

Victorian repair and expansion, 1851–53

By the mid-nineteenth century, Darwen had been transformed. What had been a dispersed weaving settlement became an industrial township shaped by coal mining, manufacturing and rapid population growth.

Between 1801 and 1851, the population rose from 3,587 to 11,702, an increase of over 200%. This was not gradual change but acceleration.

Such growth placed new pressures on the church. By 1851, the 1722 chapel showed clear signs of structural failure. The foundations had sunk and fissures had opened in the walls. An architect declared the building

unsafe. It was closed, and services moved to the schoolhouse at Holden Fold.

The cause was not age, but damage through coal having been worked “under the chapel yard”. This is not just speculation. Mr John and James Brandwood were identified as having got coal beneath the chapel and its yard. The Brandwoods were one of a number of families who had grown wealthy through industry like coal and linked through marriages and civic roles. A group was sent to talk to the Brandwoods on behalf of St James to negotiate a contribution “towards the rebuilding of St James Chapel it being damaged by their getting of coal under the chapel yard”.

Mr Brandwood offered money for the coal under the Chapel and chapel yard and a contribution to the repair.

This is revealing because it suggests an acknowledgement of responsibility. However, the contribution did not cover the total cost of restoration. The rebuilding that followed still depended on parish subscription and wider financial effort.

Between 1852 and 1853 the church was substantially restored. The walls were made sound, the roof entirely renewed, the interior re-pewed with open benches, new galleries erected and the organ improved. The building was not merely stabilised but rather adapted for a larger Victorian congregation with Victorian expectations of

Image provided by Blackburn with Darwen Library & Information Service for the Cotton Town project (www.cottontown.org)

This moment illustrates the recurring pattern. Industrial expansion brought both opportunity and strain. The church once again became the place where those pressures were worked through, where disruption was managed, and continuity re-established in new forms.

Inter-War Renewal – 1937

After the First World War, further structural problems emerged. Dry rot was discovered extensively within the fabric. Rather than applying piecemeal remedies, the parish chose comprehensive reconstruction.

Fundraising was once again led from the community through concerts, dramatic performances and local initiatives.

The rebuilt interior incorporated a memorial chancel dedicated to parishioners lost in the First World War. Architectural features of earlier phases, including the semi-circular apse, were retained or reinterpreted to preserve continuity with the past while modernising the space.

This renewal took place during economic uncertainty again in Lancashire. The cotton industry had suffered severe contraction after 1921 and employment insecurity was widespread. Yet the parish again invested in its church.

Renewal as Pattern

Across five centuries, each structural crisis coincided with wider social or economic pressure: post-Reformation instability, eighteenth-century demographic growth, nineteenth-century industrialisation and mining, twentieth-century war and economic decline.

Every rebuilding phase reflects not simply architectural necessity but communal decision.

St James has not survived through architectural distinction or financial advantage alone. Renewal here has always been practical, collective and rooted in everyday life. The building changed because Darwen changed. Yet the impulse to maintain this space remained constant.

THEME 2

Standing Ground: Young People and the Fight for Education

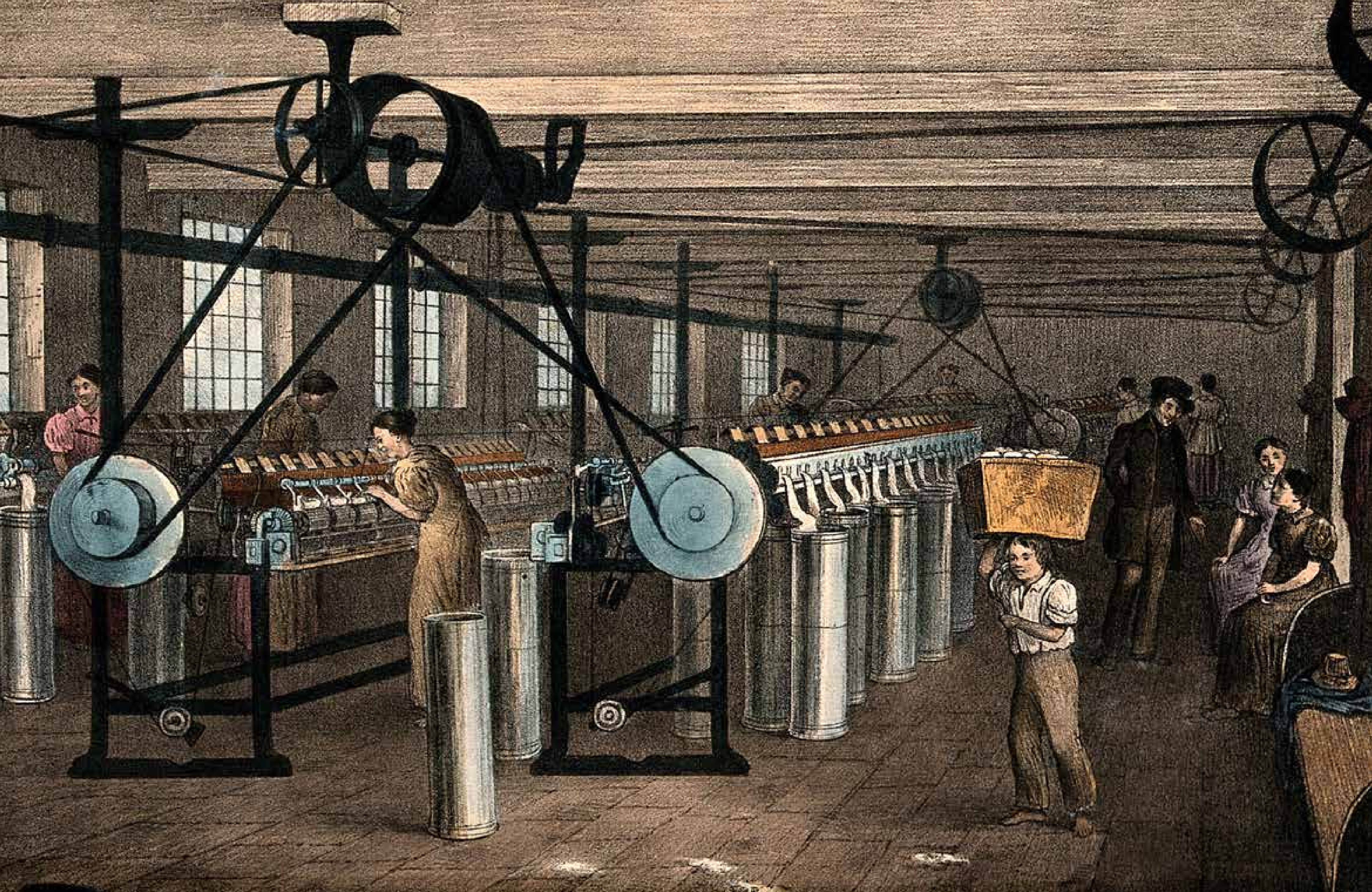
Education at St James did not develop in a straight line. It emerged through pressure, negotiation and, at times, open disagreement. What appears in the records is not a settled system, but an ongoing effort to reconcile national reform, local authority, and the needs of families.

Early schooling: church and community

Before national systems were fully established, education at St James grew out of the church itself. The Sunday School was not simply religious instruction. It provided literacy, structure and a shared space for children and young people within the parish.

The neighbourhood around St James was shaped by manufacturers, merchants, professionals and commissioners, but it was sustained by cotton and mill workers, colliers, quarrymen, etc. For children in East Darwen, schooling did not exist in isolation from labour but sat within a working landscape.

The school minutes themselves acknowledge the pressures placed on children. A report inserted into



Women are working at large cotton machines, a child is carrying a basket on his head, and other people are sitting on benches at the side of the room. Coloured lithograph after J.R. Barfoot. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.

the managers' records describe Darwen as "mainly manufacturing" with a "large number of half-time children," and warned that a child's education should be carried as far as possible before "dividing time between factory and school."

Attendance at school was negotiated against working shifts, seasonal pressures and household income. Even when children were not formally employed, they were part of domestic economies structured around mill hours and piecework. The discipline expected in school mirrored the discipline required in industry such as punctuality, order, silence, and repetition.

Building of the New School (1878–1882)

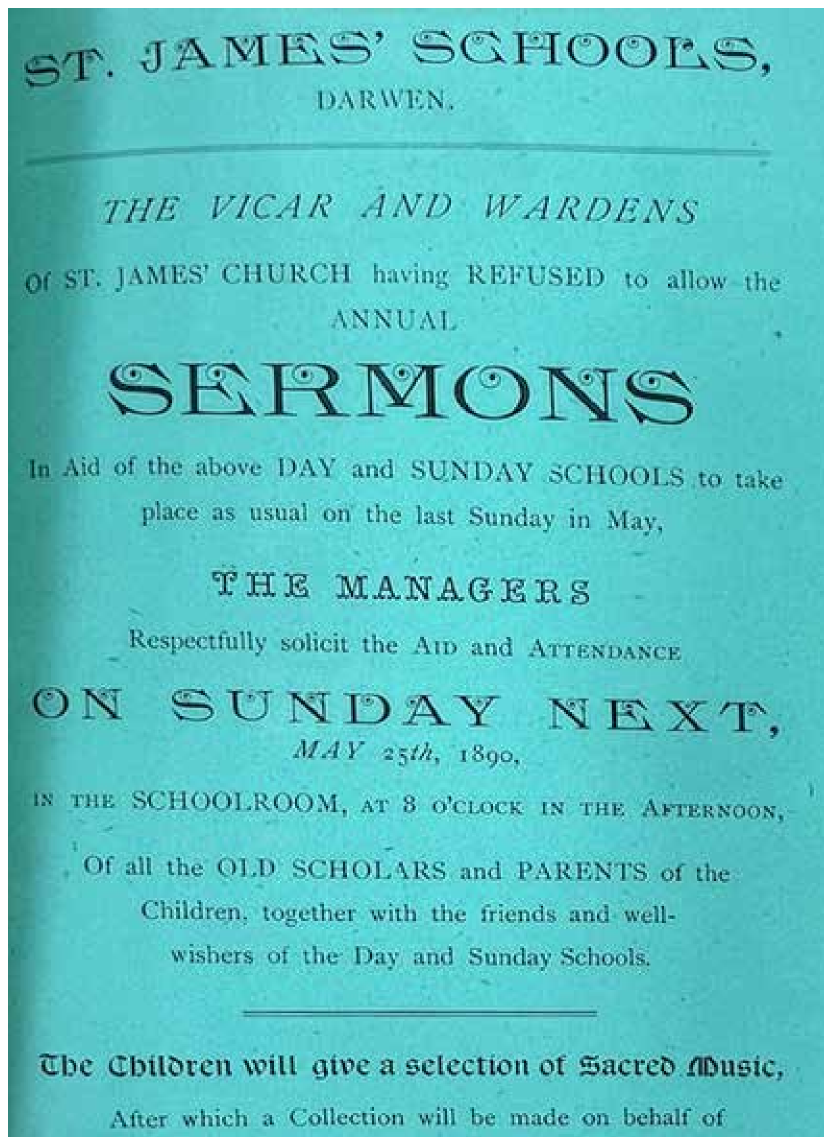
Between 1878 and 1882 the new St James School was built, but the process threatened the school's future. The sale of the old school site was intended to fund the new building, yet disagreement over the new trust deed became decisive. The issue was whether the vicar of St James should always hold a place on the school board. While the current vicar was accepted, some resisted granting future vicars an automatic role.

The Reverend Blamire supported permanent clerical representation, while William Walmsley of Industry Mills and others opposed it. The board voted that the vicar would not automatically be a trustee.

At the Sunday School by George DuMaurier from Punch (16 Marh 1867) Image provided by the VictorianWeb and the Internet Archive

However, the Education Department disagreed, pointing out that the earlier trust required that "the resident minister of St James… shall always be a Trustee." When Blamire was removed from the board, the Department warned that if governance differed from the original trust, the proceeds from the sale of the old school could not legally fund the new one.

When the board proceeded regardless, they lost access to those funds and had to reimburse the buyer. The


ST. JAMES' SCHOOLS,
DARWEN.

THE VICAR AND WARDENS

OF ST. JAMES' CHURCH having REFUSED to allow the
ANNUAL

SERMONS

In Aid of the above DAY and SUNDAY SCHOOLS to take
place as usual on the last Sunday in May,

THE MANAGERS

Respectfully solicit the AID and ATTENDANCE

ON SUNDAY NEXT,
MAY 25th, 1890,

IN THE SCHOOLROOM, AT 3 O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON,

Of all the OLD SCHOLARS and PARENTS of the
Children, together with the friends and well-
wishers of the Day and Sunday Schools.

The Children will give a selection of Sacred Music,

After which a Collection will be made on behalf of

Image of handbill held in Lancashire Archives from the St James School Minutes

school opened in 1882, but tensions continued until 1884, when Blamire was restored to the board.

This was not simply disagreement. It was a negotiation over how a national system of education would be interpreted and applied within the parish.

Walmsley represented industrial authority; Blamire, clerical authority. Their conflict was public, reported in newspapers, showing its significance beyond the church.

The Sunday School dispute

The Sunday School became the most visible point of conflict. It had long been held in the day school buildings under an agreement that the vicar paid £85 annually. When the agreement expired, Blamire refused to continue without revised terms, arguing that clergy should not bear both fundraising responsibilities and rental costs.

When no agreement was reached, he withdrew. The managers continued the Sunday School, but problems quickly emerged and they proved ill equipped to deliver Sunday school provision.

By May 1890 around thirty parishioners formally protested the "unsatisfactory condition" of the school, citing poor discipline, lack of teachers and disorganisation. This was an organised intervention by working people addressing

those in positions of authority. A group of local men, including Henry Whittaker, Nathaniel Walsh, John Holden and others, met at 17 Perry Street and presented their concerns through a named secretary.

The managers questioned their authority and insisted on formal procedure. Vocal response to governance in this instance, had emerged from the streets rather than established structures.

Despite the dispute, the episode shows the central role of St James in everyday life. The church was not separate from the town but embedded within institutions that shaped it, particularly education. In an industrial community, schools were critical to stability and opportunity, and questions of governance mattered deeply.

Proposals were made to advertise special services, questions were raised about missing sermons, and suggestions surfaced to return the Sunday School entirely to Blamire's control, though these were not adopted. Complaints about staffing and discipline continued.

The episode reveals strong local agency. Families organised collectively to challenge governance and advocate for the moral and educational conditions of their children. For pupils, however, the result was instability: changing leadership, disrupted teaching and visible conflict. St James reflects how wider structural change translated into everyday uncertainty.

Remembering local legends

The conflicts left a lasting impression. As late as 1917, local newspapers recalled the clashes between Walmsley and Blamire as "battles royal," in which both men claimed to act for the good of the parish.

Blamire is also remembered within St James itself. A stained-glass window installed after his death in 1905 depicts Christ welcoming children, and the passage "Suffer little children to come unto me." The inscription records gratitude for his "kindness and charity."

The donors were not wealthy benefactors but William Bentley, a plasterer who later became a decorator employing others, and his wife Betsy, a weaver. Their gift reflects how working people remembered Blamire's role in their lives.

Together, these memories suggest that the conflict was not only about governance but about deeper questions of authority, care and responsibility in a changing industrial town.

THEME 3

How Darwen changed around St James

The story of St James cannot be separated from the story of Darwen itself. The church did not sit outside change, observing it from a distance. It stood within it, surrounded by it, and repeatedly adapted as the landscape, economy and population around it shifted.

What emerges is not simply growth, but transformation. And at each stage, St James functioned as a point where that transformation was interpreted and made meaningful at a local level.

A dispersed landscape

In its earliest phases, the area around St James was not a town but a scattered rural landscape. Settlement was organised into folds, small clusters of farms and dwellings such as Holden Fold, connected by tracks rather than formal roads.

Families worked the land and, increasingly, supplemented this with handloom weaving carried out in their own homes. Work and domestic life were closely intertwined. Production was small-scale, flexible and

rooted in household economies.

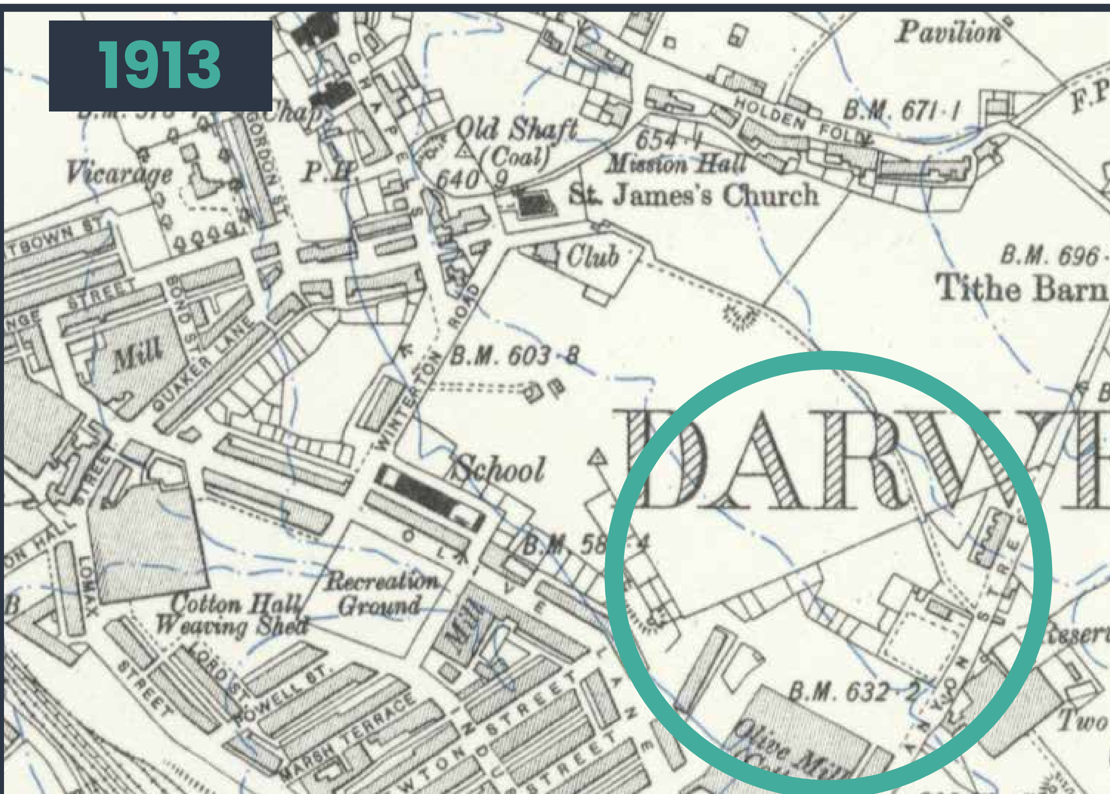
In this setting, the church provided one of the few shared points of connection. It brought together people who otherwise lived and worked at a distance from one another.

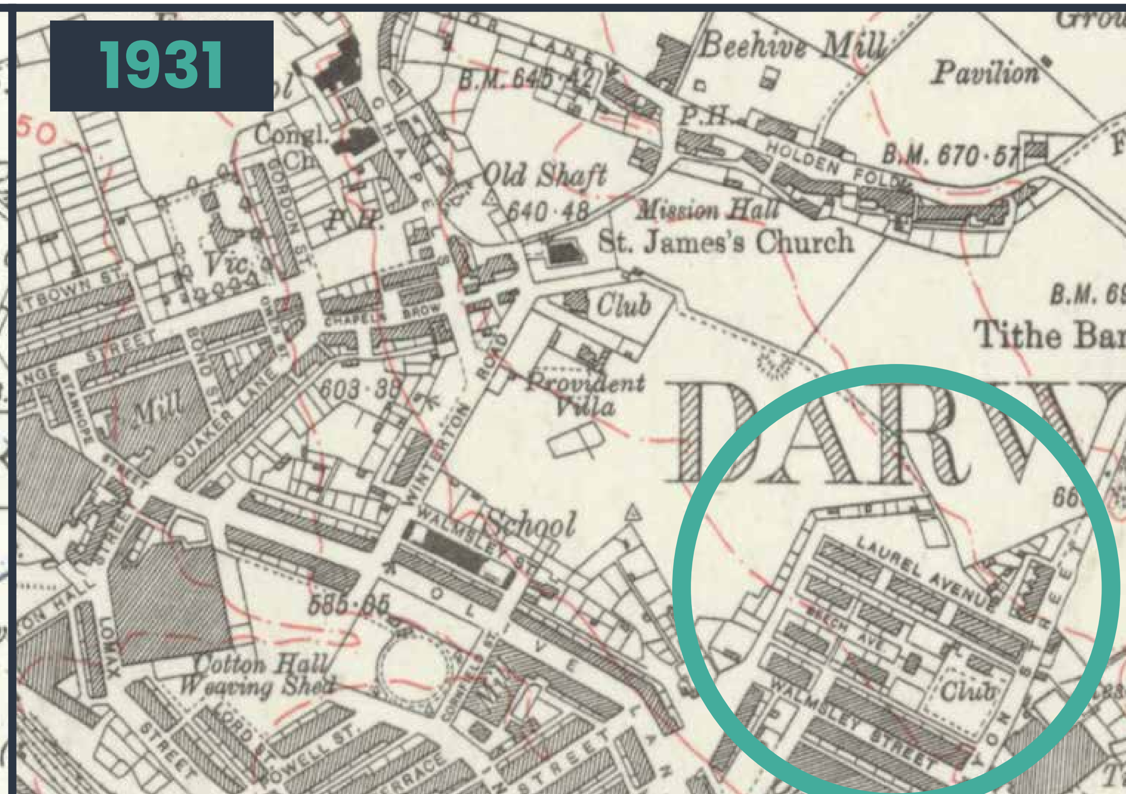
Industry and acceleration

From the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, this pattern began to change rapidly. The introduction of mechanised industry, alongside the exploitation of local coal and the expansion of manufacturing, transformed Darwen from a dispersed settlement into an industrial township.

Population growth was dramatic. Between 1801 and 1851, numbers more than tripled. Housing expanded quickly, often in terraces built close to mills and places of work. The physical shape of the landscape altered, with development spreading along the valley and up its sides.

Maps show that between 1849 and 1891 several major roads were laid out, including Exchange Street, Gordon Street and Lightbown Street, along with new housing





between the railway and what became Olive Lane and Suddell Side Street. By 1911 Winterton Road had been added, and by 1928 further streets developed around

Olive Mill. After the Second World War, new housing followed between 1947 and 1953, including Ivinson Road, Hazel Avenue, Ash Grove and Oak Grove.

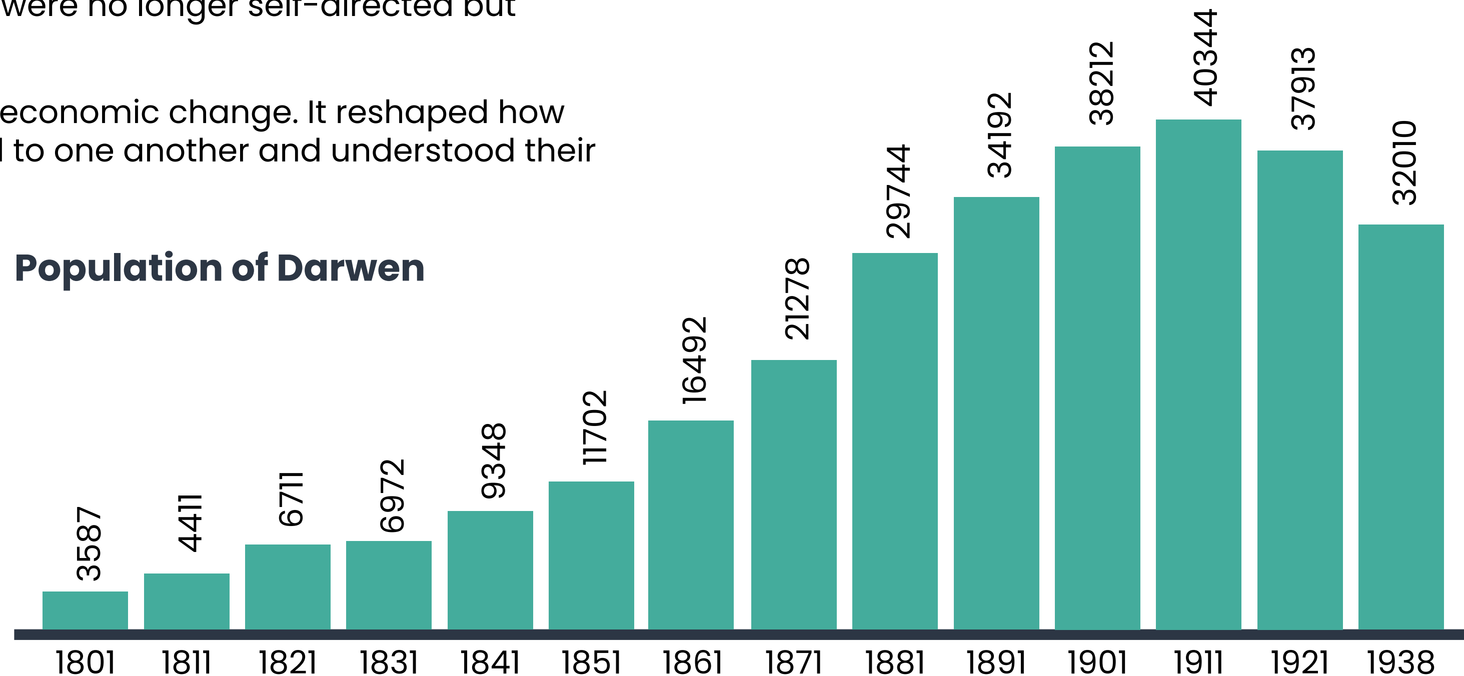
Work changed as well. Labour moved out of the home and into factories, quarries and mills. Time became structured around shifts rather than seasons. The rhythms of daily life were no longer self-directed but externally imposed.

This was not simply economic change. It reshaped how people lived, related to one another and understood their place in the world.

A changing community

As Darwen expanded, its population became more complex. Migration into the area brought new families, skills and experiences. Older patterns of kinship and locality were disrupted as people arrived from different regions to take up work.

The sense of a tightly bound, locally rooted community began to shift. While new forms of social life emerged



around work and neighbourhood, the older structures of mutual familiarity and shared experience were altered.

Census returns between 1841 and 1921 reveal how Darwen was a largely local population, with most residents born in Darwen or nearby Lancashire towns such as Blackburn, Bolton and Accrington. Repeated surnames suggest long-established family networks. Industrialisation

initially reshaped the work of existing residents rather than bringing large numbers of newcomers. Families moved from domestic weaving, agriculture and small trades into mill work, mining and other industrial occupations.

By the 1870s and 1880s workers from Birmingham, Staffordshire, Manchester and Ireland began to appear in small numbers. By the end of the century, records show a wider range of birthplaces, including Cambridgeshire, Devon, Wales and Ireland in greater numbers. Improved transport, agricultural change, military service and marriage all contributed to greater mobility. Darwen became a place where people from across Britain settled, and the parish evolved from a tightly rooted community into one shaped by national movement.

In the later twentieth century Darwen experienced other wave of inward migration. Oral testimony suggests that in the 1950s Italian people began to settle in Darwen, this has been speculated that due to a World War Two internment camp located not far away, created connections and familiarity. Also, in the 1970s the town formed part of government-supported relocation schemes, moving unemployed workers from areas such as Scotland to places where industrial work remained. Families who secured jobs and housing could receive financial assistance. Although different in nature, this

continued the pattern of population shaped by wider economic forces.

In this context, institutions like St James took on renewed importance. They provided continuity within change, a place where people could locate themselves within a rapidly shifting environment.

Work, risk and adaptation

Industrialisation brought opportunity, but also risk. Employment could be unstable. Work was often physically demanding and, at times, dangerous. Families relied on multiple wage earners, and income could fluctuate.

People were conscious of the rapid change thrust upon them, by the speed of industrialisation. An early example is the weavers' uprising. In the 1700s many families wove cloth at home alongside farm work. This system offered some independence but little security. By the late 1700s and early 1800s wages were falling and machines in

Credit: Three women sit and spin wool and cotton as another stirs a pot on the fire and a child warms his hands. Stipple engraving. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.

mills could produce cloth more cheaply. Many handloom weavers struggled to survive.

In April 1826 thousands of weavers from east Lancashire met at Whinney Hill and marched for four days, breaking power looms in protest at hunger and the loss of their trade. On 26 April, at Chatterton near Edenfield, soldiers read the Riot Act and fired into the crowd, killing at least six people. A notice reported in the Liverpool Echo on 6 May 1826 show that Over Darwen weavers were involved:

“We the weavers of Over Darwen have taken into consideration to put a stop to steam-weaving… and to assist in the demolition of the same.”

Occupational patterns visible in census records, labourers, quarrymen, cotton workers and paper makers, reflect a community shaped by industry but not secured by it. In this environment, the need for structures that could absorb uncertainty became more pronounced.

St James and its associated institutions played a role in this. Through education, welfare provision, and social activity, it helped to translate the realities of industrial life into forms that could be collectively managed.

It did not remove hardship, but it contributed to making it bearable and shared.

Mutual Aid in Times of Change

The census records reveal not a single occupation but a web of livelihoods. Families often relied on several wage earners. A father might work in a quarry or as a labourer while a mother and daughters worked in the mills. Lodgers were sometimes taken in to supplement income. Economic survival depended on cooperation within and between households, and in response communities created their own forms of security to manage the uncertainties of industrial life.

This need was supported by mutual aid organisations such as the St James Sick Club and Burial Society. In the nineteenth century there was no government support for illness and no help with funeral costs. Most people were paid weekly. If they could not work, they did not earn. A funeral could cost several weeks' wages, pushing families into debt or forcing them to pawn belongings at a time of grief. Illness affected not just the individual but the entire household.

The Society was formed in July 1844 under the chairmanship of the Reverend Dunderdale at the old Eccleshill School, taking inspiration from Holy Trinity. Members paid a small weekly contribution, usually a halfpenny or a penny, into a shared fund. In return, they received payments during sickness and at death. This was not charity, but a collective fund built and managed by its members.

In 1859 Alice Adcroft, aged fourteen, lived on Pot House Lane with her family. Her father was a coal miner, her brother a quarryman, and both Alice and her older sister worked in a cotton mill. When her case came before the Sick Club, she had not yet been a member long enough to qualify for full benefit. The committee debated whether to make an exception and chose to delay their decision.

This was not simply a question of rules. Alice's wages contributed to a household dependent on multiple incomes. If illness stopped her working, the impact would have been immediate. The minutes capture the tension between protecting the shared fund and responding to the realities of a working family.

The financial scale of the society shows why such decisions mattered. In one year over £33 was paid out to the sick and the dead, and the following year more than £46 in sick pay and £12 for funerals. These were substantial sums in a community of low and uncertain wages. The club dealt with constant demand, not occasional need.

That demand created pressure. Payments had to be balanced and rules enforced. By-laws limited how long members could draw sick pay, and anyone found falsely claiming was excluded. Admission was also controlled. In one case, a new member was accepted only after providing a certificate of good health. The society could not afford immediate risk.

Membership was rooted in local networks. Many lived close to the church in streets such as Holden Fold, Olive Lane, Chapels Brow and Gordon Street. Family names recur across the records, including Taylor, Duckworth, Lightbown, Heath, Edge, Emmison, Leach and Eccles. Membership grew through neighbourhood and kinship ties.

The age pattern is striking. Most members were between

five and twenty, with many joining under the age of twelve. Children were enrolled early, and as they entered working life they moved into fuller membership. This reflects how families prepared for financial risk, particularly funeral costs. The records also show girls as clearly as boys, with teenage girls joining as they began mill work.

The minutes show a well-managed organisation. Officers were elected annually, reports were reviewed, and when funds allowed, the committee sought to invest surplus money to secure a return.

Local, practical and forward-looking, the Sick Club formed part of everyday life in industrial Darwen. In a world with little external support, it shows a community creating its own safety net, built through trust, contribution and shared responsibility around St James.

THEME 4

Living Through Conflict: War and Community

War altered everyday life in ways that were immediate and unevenly felt. Men left for service, often with little certainty of return. Families adjusted to absence, irregular communication, and the strain of managing households and work with fewer hands. For some, the impact was anxiety and waiting, and for others, it was injury, bereavement, and the permanent reshaping of family life. These experiences were not shared equally, but they were widely understood. Across the parish, the war was not a distant event but something that pressed into daily routines, relationships, and expectations.

Within this disruption, St James provided a point of steadiness. It did not remove the effects of war, but it helped people navigate them. Vigils and services created spaces where uncertainty and grief could be held collectively rather than carried alone. Names were read aloud and collective prayer was a way to momentarily share the emotions. The parish magazine became an important thread of connection, sharing news, acknowledging absence, recording loss, and offering guidance on how to maintain contact with those serving. It helped shape how people communicated,

what they shared, and how they understood their role at home. Alongside this, the ordinary rhythms of parish life continued, services, meetings, and records, providing a sense that, even in altered form, community life endured.

Over time, these experiences were gathered into more permanent forms of memory. The rebuilding of the church in 1937 included the addition of a Roll of Honour, fixing into the fabric of the building the names of those connected to the parish who had served and died. What had first appeared in lists, notices, and conversations became something enduring and visible: a shared record that linked individuals to place and ensured that loss was not dispersed or forgotten.

The impact of war is most clearly understood at the level of individual lives. John Round, born in Darwen in 1912, lived and worked locally before serving as a driver with the Royal Army Service Corps during the Second World War. He married at St James in 1942, shortly before being sent overseas. His service took him through North Africa and into Italy, transporting supplies in support of the Allied advance. In April 1945, aged 32, he was killed in action. His life follows a pattern seen across the parish: rooted in Darwen, shaped by work and family, interrupted by war, and ultimately brought back into local memory through the church and community efforts to remember. Through stories such as his, the scale of conflict is understood not in numbers alone, but in the loss of specific lives held within a shared community.

THEME 5

Belonging: keeping a community together

In recent conversations with residents, a consistent feeling has emerged of something once central to the area bieng diminished. People describe a loss of community, of neighbours knowing one another, of shared experience, of mutual support shaped by working and living closely together.

At St James, belonging was not left to chance. It was actively made. Its role was not only to serve the community, but to hold it together, to translate pressures and experiences into forms that people could participate in collectively.

More than necessity

Community in Darwen was often forged through necessity. Work was demanding. Living conditions could be difficult. Families depended on one another and on wider networks of support.

But belonging was not sustained by hardship alone. Alongside labour and mutual aid, there were deliberate acts of coming together: social events, fundraising activities, seasonal celebrations and shared rituals. These created moments of relief, connection and

recognition, opportunities for people to experience themselves as part of something larger than their individual circumstances.

St James played a role in organising and sustaining these moments.

Music and shared experience

Music was one of the clearest and earliest expressions of this. At St James, music was not simply an embellishment to worship. Across the surviving records, it appears as a thread in the life of the church, something that gathered people, marked celebration, and created continuity between generations.

The presence of an organ on the site from 18 July 1755 is one of the earliest indicators of this importance. Its opening was described as "a joyful day," attended not only by local clergy but by visiting musicians from neighbouring towns, including Manchester and Rochdale.

This was not a small, contained event. It reached beyond the parish, drawing people together through a shared cultural experience.

Music functioned as a form of translation. It took belief, celebration and community identity and made them tangible, something that could be heard, felt and participated in collectively.

During the rebuilding of 1851, when the church itself was being renewed, the organ was not neglected. Instead, it was enlarged and improved. The earlier instrument, with ten stops, was replaced by one with eighteen, significantly extending its range. New elements such as a Swell division, Dulciana and Oboe stops, and pedal pipes allowed for greater depth, variation, and musical expression.

The expanded instrument supported stronger congregational singing and enabled more ambitious musical performances. It allowed the church to hold larger, more engaging events, and to bring people together through shared experience.

In 1851, the organist was Thomas Holden, connected to the Holden who had played the earlier organ nearly a century before. At the same time, Andrew Bury took on the role of singing master, following Joseph Walmsley, continuing a pattern in which musical leadership passed through families and across generations. Another organist, Thomas Astley, is remembered as serving the chapel for around forty years.

This continuity matters. Music at St James was not imported or occasional. It was rooted in the community itself. Skills were learned, carried, and sustained over time. Participation created familiarity, and familiarity created belonging.

S. JAMES', DARWEN.

New Year's Parties

and Entertainments.

CONGREGATIONAL PARTY,

On Thursday, January 1st, 1914.

Meat Tea and Entertainment, 1/. (No Half-price). Entertainment only, 6d.

Tea, 4-30 p.m. Entertainment, 6-30 p.m.

SCHOLARS' PARTY,

ON

Saturday, January 3rd, 1914.

At 4-30 p.m.

Coffee and Buns and Entertainment, 3d. each.

Image of handbill held in Lancashire Archives from the St James School Minutes

New Year: Marking time together

New Year's Day was widely regarded in Darwen as a more significant communal celebration than Christmas. Mills and offices closed, creating a rare pause in the rhythm of industrial life. In the early 1900s, a New Year's party at St James would begin with tea. The room would fill with long tables, laid out ready for hundreds of people. Children and adults were often served separately, each group arriving at its allotted time so that everyone could be fed before the performances started.

For the children, the food was simple but thoughtful. Instead of plain tea, they might be given warm cocoa, something organisers knew they enjoyed. Plates were filled with bread and butter, buns, or sweet cakes. Behind the scenes, everything had been carefully measured. Organisers had worked out how many people to expect, sometimes hundreds, and ordered food to match. There was just enough to go round, with volunteers cutting, serving, and carrying trays between tables.

Not everyone who came was always part of the Sunday School. Some arrived from outside, drawn by the promise of a good tea and an evening's entertainment. The organisers knew this, and sometimes worried about it, but it also showed how far the reach of these events extended into the wider community.

Once everyone had eaten, the room would shift. Tables cleared or pushed aside, attention turned to the stage. On New Year's Day 1909, parishioners could enjoy a lively programme with local performers taking to the stage, offering everything from concertina and violin solos to popular songs and humorous pieces. Short dramatic sketches added variety, turning the evening into a full-scale community performance.

The following day, attention turned to the children of the Sunday School. Separate parties were arranged for senior and junior scholars, reflecting the structured nature of the school itself. The programme did not end there. A "Grand Lantern Exhibition" rounded off the festivities, an early form of visual entertainment using projected images and storytelling, offering something novel and memorable for those attending.

In 1914 the entertainment evolved. The programme featured a full operetta, The Gipsy Maid, with named roles performed by members of the congregation. Children and young people were not simply attendees; they were cast as central participants, taking on characters, learning lines, and performing before their community.

This theatrical element continued with dramatic dialogues such as The Outcast, alongside choral pieces and solo performances. Music ranged from hymns to popular songs, while instrumental performances and recitations added variety. The structure of the

programme, divided into parts, with intervals and a formal chairman, suggests an event carefully staged and managed, echoing the format of larger public entertainments.

The children's tea and entertainment on the Saturday extended this further, featuring songs, solos, and another operetta performed in three acts, Rival Fairies; or, The Broken Wand. The inclusion of multiple acts and a chorus indicate a significant level of preparation and rehearsal, pointing to the Sunday School as a space not only of learning but of creativity and discipline.

As in earlier years, these events were both social and instructive. They provided enjoyment, but also fostered confidence, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, the programme reflects the cultural norms of its period, drawing on popular theatrical forms and storytelling conventions of the early twentieth century.

By the 1970s this had evolved into the annual Pantomomime.

St. James School Pantomime. Darwen, Image provided by Blackburn with Darwen Library & Information Service for the Cotton Town project (www.cottontown.org)

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